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## The Impact of the Black Death

by Zachary Peschke

(History 1110)

At the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Europe was in the midst of a revitalization. The agricultural revolution had made food more plentiful than before. More land was being cultivated and life was more optimistic than it had been for centuries. Despite a famine from 1315-1317 and the onset of the Hundred Year's War, the 14<sup>th</sup> century continued to be a time of growth in Europe. This growth came to an end in 1347 though, with the emergence of the Black Death. According to Norman Cantor, "The Black Death of 1348-49 was the greatest biomedical disaster in European and possibly world history" (Cantor 6). The Black Death decimated the population of Europe, halted the advancement of science and intellectual endeavors, as well as ushered in a new age of pessimism and morbidness. Europe would not recover from this blow until many centuries later.

The Black Death was a pandemic that affected not only Western Europe, but also the Middle East and Asia during 1347-1351. In Europe alone, it wiped out at least one third of the population, or 20 million people (Cantor 7). The disease behind the pandemic is most commonly explained as the bubonic plague. The bubonic plague is caused by a bacterium from a flea. It is commonly accepted that the fleas attached themselves to black rats, which traveled from Asia to Europe thereby spreading the plague. While this is the most commonly accepted theory behind the Black Death, it is not without flaws, and there are several other theories of what caused the Black Death.

The author brings up the possibility that the Black Death was not caused by the bubonic plague alone. Cantor believes a form of cattle disease was involved in addition to the plague, probably anthrax (Cantor 14). Anthrax would account for the equal spread of the Black Death in summer and winter months. The major case for anthrax is the spread of the Black Death in Iceland. It was not until the 1600's that rats came to Iceland, which would make the spread of the bubonic plague almost impossible without the carriers of the disease (16). More and more this theory of several diseases attributing to the Black Death has caught on. Whether it is finding anthrax spores in the mass graves of plague victims or the recent proof that cattle disease can be transmitted to humans, evidence appears to be indicating that the Black Death was more than just the bubonic plague (15).

The modern understanding of the Black Death is a far cry from what those living through it believed. Most people saw the disease as retribution for sin and immoral behavior (Cantor 120). Doctors attempting to find an explanation other than spiritual turned to a different theory. They "...assumed that it was spread through the air-as a miasma-from person to person" (21). When rational or religious explanations failed, some turned to serpents and snakes as the cause of the spreading of the disease. These animals were exotic to the Europeans and have always been commonly associated with pestilence, as can be seen in the Bible (173). Other theories from this time ranged from astrological alignment to physiological imbalance (119-20).

Another explanation that gained popularity was that Jewish people had poisoned the wells and caused the widespread death. This theory of a widespread Jewish conspiracy was based on "confessions" by Jews who had been tortured and held captive. This conspiracy led to persecution of Jewish people in some areas even before the plague reached them. In an attempt to stop the persecution, Pope Clement VI issued a papal bull to stop the killing of Jews without a proper judicial verdict (Cantor 154). To circumvent this, courts were quickly set up that gave very little justice to

the Jews. This persecution of Jews led to the Jewish people fleeing to modern day Poland and Ukraine, to which many modern day Jews can trace a bond (167).

The persecution of the Jewish people is just one example of how the people of the time reacted to the Black Death. While it was one of the most radical reactions to the plague, there were no shortages of responses, some more drastic than others. A large section of the population of Europe felt the Black Death was retribution for sin and immoral behavior, and in response to this, some attempted to make up for the sin by living a temperate life. They "...lived a separate and secluded life, which they regulated with the utmost care, avoiding every kind of luxury, but eating and drinking very moderately of the most delicate viands and the finest wines, holding converse with none but one another, lest tidings of sickness or death should reach them..." (Boccacio). Some people felt simply abstaining was not enough to resolve the punishment that had been cast down upon them. The flagellants were one of the groups who felt more than a temperate life was needed. A group of devout people, the flagellants agreed with most in that plague was a result of human sin. However, instead of going to the church and clergy to seek forgiveness, they felt additional and more severe penance was needed. The flagellants traveled from town to town whipping themselves for their sins as well as inciting violence and disorder wherever they went (Cantor 157). While repentance was seen by many as a way to avoid the plague, others felt different solutions were needed. Those who saw that leading a more temperate life did not save one from the plague turned to the other extreme, believing "...that to drink freely, frequent places of public resort, and take their pleasure with song and revel, sparing to satisfy no appetite, and to laugh and mock at no event, was the sovereign remedy for so great an evil..." (Boccacio). Other common ways to avoid the plague were to stop taking baths (to keep the pores closed) and to hang tapestry over the windows, which people felt would stop the airborne disease (Cantor 22-23). Understandably, these reactions did little to halt the spread of the plague.

As the Black Death spread throughout Europe, the impact it left could sometimes be seen immediately. Sometimes though, the impact was not felt until at least a generation later. The prime example of this could be seen in manorial society. The author specifically studies English manors, like Halesowen, in the 1300's, which provided a clear example of what the Black Death could do to a society. By the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the agricultural revolution and good climate had provided a high demand for land in England. With plenty of people to work the land, serfdom had become inefficient in comparison to hiring a person to work the land for a month or a year (Cantor 70). When the Black Death decimated this peasant population, the effects were not immediate. Peasant labor was not in short supply prior to the plague, so there were enough peasants to fill jobs left by victims of the plague. As the years went on though, the labor was not there like it had been in previous generations. This shortage of labor led to the peasants exercising more control and asking for more privileges. As Cantor states, "The peasants were trying to improve their position in a labor market favorable to themselves" (89). In response to this, the English parliament issued the Statute of Labourers in 1351. The statute attempted to set wage controls and forced able bodied laborers to work. The enforcement of the statute clashed with the newfound control the peasant class felt and was a main source of tension between the peasants and the ruling class. This new attitude and the rising tensions led to the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, in which the peasants appeared within grasp of obtaining equality. One chronicler claims the peasants demanded "...that there should be equality among all people save only the King..." and "...that there should be no more villeins in England, and no serfdom or villeinage, but that all men should be free and of one condition" (Anonimale Chronicle). The revolt eventually sputtered out though, and the effects of the Black Death upon the peasants became the exact opposite: The advantageous and wealthier peasants and gentry became wealthier, while the poor peasants became poorer. "Class polarization, capital accumulation, social mobility into the yeoman class: These were the tangible outcomes of the Black Death in Halesowen as elsewhere" (Cantor 91).

While there were families in England that rose in status following the Black Death, there were undoubtedly those who fell. During the plague, a wealthy family with a large land holding could be wiped out with a couple of unlucky deaths. With the death of some heirs of a family, a large portion of the wealth could fall into the hands of the widows. Each heir's wife would be entitled to one-third of her husband's income until she died (Cantor 127). Due to the plague, this was not uncommon, and within a few generations a family would not only lose their fortune, but also be at risk of the family line disappearing.

While the family would feel the ill effects of the plague, these widows prospered. Women amassed great fortunes and with the money came more independence for them (Cantor 130). If they chose to re-marry, they could often bring great wealth into this marriage and force better treatment.

In the aftermath of the Black Death, women gained stature with the help of an emerging profession. The lawyers who negotiated these conflicts over land became essential to the wealthy family (Cantor 125). A family's prosperity seemed to rest at times solely on the shoulders of a lawyer. If a family had a talented lawyer, they would continue to prosper. If they did not, coupled with bad luck, they could quickly lose most, if not all of their wealth.

The Church and clergy were not immune to the Black Death and also faced difficult times. The immediate impact of the plague was the loss of clergymen. Church authorities who had often devoted their life to the service of God had to be replaced by significantly less experienced men, and in some cases, corrupt men who abused their new found power and authority (Cantor 207). In addition to a new group of clergy, the crises during the 14<sup>th</sup> century within the Catholic Church's leadership contributed to the growing problems. In 1305, the French king Philip IV was able to exert enough pressure upon the College of Cardinals to get a Frenchman, Clement V, elected as the new pope. Using the turmoil in Rome as an excuse, though caused by Philip IV, the papacy moved from Rome to Avignon, a city close to the French kingdom. During a period from 1305-1377, the papacy appeared to be in the hands of the French kings. During this time the papacy was known for its excess and abuse of power. The famous humanist Petrarch stated, "Instead of holy solitude we find a criminal host and crowds of the most infamous satellites; instead of soberness, licentious banquets; instead of pious pilgrimages, preternatural and foul sloth..." (Petrarch). Many during this time shared Petrarch's view, and in order to reconcile the power of the papacy, Pope Gregory XI attempted to move the papacy back to Rome. However, he soon died after returning to Rome and the election process for the new pope created another embarrassing scandal for the church. Threatened with violence, the mostly French College of Cardinals elected a new Italian pope, but soon rescinded the decision and elected a fellow Frenchman as the "actual" pope. This led to the Great Schism in the Catholic Church, which continued for nearly forty years. At a time when the Catholic Church was needed most to stabilize and bring calm to a post-plague society, it was overwhelmed with problems and embarrassments of its own. These excesses and embarrassments by the new leadership in the Catholic Church contributed to the dissatisfaction in the Church. Those dissatisfied may have been looking for an alternative, and went on to set the foundations for the Protestant Reformation.

If the deaths of clergymen hinted that the Black Death could strike anyone, the death of Princess Joan confirmed this. Princess Joan was the daughter of Edward III, the King of England and the leader of the Plantagenet dynasty at the time. The princess was on her way to marry Prince Pedro, who was the heir to the kingdom of Castile. With the marriage, the Plantagenet line would have stretched from England to Spain (Cantor 37). On her way to marry Prince Pedro, Princess Joan stopped in the plague-ravaged town of Bordeaux. Within weeks, the Princess had become another victim of the Black Death. After Edward III's death in 1377, the Plantagenet family continued to decline and two branches of the family fought for the crown. These two branches, the Yorkists and the Lancastrians, engaged in a civil war commonly referred to as the Wars of the Roses (57). The Wars of the Roses ended not with a Plantagenet branch in power, but with a new House of Tudor taking power. From being within the grasp of dominating Western Europe, to losing all power, the

plague can be blamed for the downfall of one of the greatest European dynasties of its time.

While the death of Princess Joan weakened the Plantagenet family, the king had to deal with the death of another powerful supporter: The Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Bradwardine. While Bradwardine's death may have been a blow to Edward, its impact was felt deeper in the realm of science and thinking. Bradwardine was educated at Oxford during a time when Oxford was seen as the center of great intellectual movements (Cantor 109). In 1321 he became a faculty member at Balliol College at Oxford. By 1323, he had obtained an advanced degree in philosophy and theology, and became a member of the faculty of Merton College (109). While at Merton College, he published significant treatises on topics such as philosophy and astrophysics. "His theory that space was an infinite void in which God could have created other worlds had revolutionary implications" (110). Bradwardine had come up with theories and ideas that would not be seen again until the 1600's (122). Bradwardine felt that "God's predestination of human events can only be endured and blessed, not explained. But humanity has the rational capacity to begin analyzing and comprehending the natural world" (111). This way of thinking was almost unheard of for the time period, and is seen by some as the beginnings of modern science (119). "Eventually, seven centuries later, this philosophy would generate modern medicine and its capacity to combat infectious disease..." (112). If Bradwardine had survived the plague, how would he have changed England? "Would the history of modern science in England date from fourteenth-century Oxford rather than from late-seventeenth-century Cambridge?" (122).

In the aftermath of the Black Death, society was in upheaval. Some peasants were able to advance, while most suffered through difficult times. Previously wealthy families lost their fortunes with deaths in the family. The Plantagenet dynasty had seemed poised to take over all of Western Europe, but soon lost the crown. Pessimism was widespread, and the clergy could not be trusted to right the ship. This was the world the Black Death left. By studying the Black Death, it allows us to see why the world has turned out the way it did. More intriguing though is to study what the world might have been had the Black Death not ravaged Western Europe. Where would science be today had Thomas Bradwardine been able to push a new brand of thinking to the forefront? Would there have been a Protestant Reformation had there not been dissatisfaction with the Catholic Church? If there had been no Protestant Reformation, would there have been Protestants flocking to the New World to escape religious persecution? While the effects of the Black Death were immediately felt within European society, by studying it now we can see the wide range of effects it had on the whole world. The Black Death was not only one of the greatest disasters in European history, but it was also one of the most defining moments in world history.

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